

Community Investments Vol 16, Issue 2 Increasing the Harvest for Farmworker Housing (Abstract)

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Introduction

The McMullen Valley, which lies between two mountain ranges in southwest Arizona, is a fertile valley noted for agriculture where labor-intensive crops such as cantaloupe, honeydew, and watermelon are grown. Cotton, wheat, carrots, and onions fill out the harvest that makes the success of agriculture in the valley highly dependent on the availability of seasonal and full-time workers. An already existing severe housing shortage for these workers was worsened in October 2000 when twin devastating floods struck (read the full story of Wenden-Salome).



At the time of the flood, numerous farm workers were sleeping under bridges and trees along a tributary of the Colorado River. Many were crowded into trailers with inadequate plumbing, which created sanitation problems. According to George Saiter, executive director of the Wenden-

Salome Flood Recovery Commission, the shortage of housing is evidenced by the amount of garbage and human feces in and around Wenden and Salome each harvest season. Everything remotely resembling a dwelling is occupied or overloaded, resulting in a slum housing environment with unsanitary living conditions and safety hazards.

McMullen Valley's conditions are common to farm communities everywhere and especially those that rely on a large temporary workforce. Such conditions as overcrowded and dilapidated housing for the lucky few who actually find shelter are contrasted with homelessness for those that cannot. The good news is that efforts are underway to provide shelter for this vital human resource—farm workers.

The full-length version of this article, *Increasing the Harvest for Farmworker Housing*, highlights a few of the initiatives taking place in California, Oregon and Washington to increase the availability of decent and affordable housing for farm workers.

The Crisis

Agriculture is a significant economic engine for the West, representing a total of almost \$40 billion dollars in gross state product for the nine states that comprise the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco's 12th District (see graph 1¹). The seasonal nature of farming causes the population of farm workers to balloon for a brief period, resulting in a short-term housing crisis for often unprepared communities. A three-year survey of housing availability and conditions for migrant and seasonal farm workers conducted by the Housing Assistance Council found that 52 percent of the housing intended for single-family occupancy was overcrowded.

Aside from the challenge of providing housing for this transient population, the limited housing available for permanent farm workers in predominately agricultural communities is often overpriced or substandard. This same

survey found that 32 percent of farmworker housing units in the four western states surveyed (CA, ID, OR, WA) could be considered either “moderately” or “severely substandard” with such conditions as sagging roofs, broken windows and rodent infestation. The majority of these units had children present.²

Graph 1: 2001 Gross State Product (millions of dollars)

State	Total GSP	Ag. Services, Forestry & Fishing	Farms	Agriculture as a % of total GSP
US	\$10,137,190	\$60,054	\$80,596	1.39%
AK	\$28,581	\$476	\$21	1.74%
AZ	\$160,687	\$1,266	\$1,339	1.62%
CA	\$1,359,265	\$11,667	\$12,768	1.80%
HI	\$43,710	\$216	\$288	1.15%
ID	\$36,905	\$452	\$1,691	5.81%
NV	\$79,220	\$425	\$204	0.79%
OR	\$120,055	\$1,427	\$1,648	2.56%
UT	\$70,409	\$283	\$592	1.24%
WA	\$222,950	\$2,329	\$2,428	2.13%
		\$39.52 billion		

Barriers and Solutions

In addition to financing, there are three common barriers to developing affordable housing in farming communities: unincorporation, zoning and limited space. Unincorporated rural areas frequently lack the infrastructure to support any type of housing development. The additional cost of installing basic water, sewage and energy infrastructure makes the price for even the most modest housing project prohibitive, particularly if the units are targeted at a seasonal population. In many states, special permission must be obtained to build housing on land zoned for agricultural use. In other states, the proximity of agriculture to cities or strict restrictions on growth limits the land available for new housing. How different states and

jurisdictions cope with addressing these barriers not only determines whether housing is available, but can serve as an example for others to follow.

Whether trailers, tents, dormitories, sweat equity homes or apartment units, the efforts to overcome multiple barriers to produce affordable housing for farm workers are as varied as the crops grown. Where possible, the approach that seems to show the most promise is rehabilitation of existing housing. Rehabilitation reduces pre-development costs associated with new construction and delays that can come from permitting and zoning, in addition to eliminating blight. But, rehabilitation is not a universal solution. As illustrated by the examples discussed, the solution that any location decides on will depend on factors and resources unique to that community.



An R.V. that will need to be removed - there were many R.V.s on the site - most of them have already been taken out, some purchased by CHOC in order to facilitate the move

Casa Del Sol (Woodland, California)

One such example is Casa Del Sol in Woodland, California. The Rural Community Assistance Corporation-sponsored project exemplifies the ways that diverse organizations can collaborate to meet the health and housing

needs of agricultural workers. Community Housing Opportunities Corporation (CHOC) joined together with the Yolo County Health Department and California Human Development Corporation on a project that will benefit agricultural workers and other low-income families. CHOC will substantially rehabilitate two adjacent mobile home parks to achieve a finished complex that will provide 127 homeownership mobile home pads, 29 rental units and one manager's unit. Purchase and rehabilitation of the parks will eliminate blight, preserve low-income housing and improve the quality of both housing and health for agricultural worker families in the community.



One of the existing mobile homes - in good condition

CHOC is in the final phase of completing a complex financing package for this project. Speaking about the project's funding sources, Paul Ainger, CHOC director of development said, "I think one unique part of the project is the partnerships that we have created with all interested parties." The City of Woodland has provided solid support through a CDBG Section 108 loan; the California Department of Housing and Community Development provided assistance with a \$1.5 million farmworker grant³ and a \$1.5 million loan from the Mobilehome Park Resident Ownership Program (MPROP).⁴ RCAC is contributing \$1.2 million from its Agricultural Worker Health and Housing Program (AWHHP).⁵ The private sector has also demonstrated support for

the project. Red Capital Mortgage is providing a construction loan and a 40-year first mortgage on the property. Bank of America has provided a leadership role in helping CHOC secure these private financing commitments and is providing construction financing. The Federal Home Loan Bank of San Francisco delivered a \$660,000 AHP grant and HUD provided an FHA 207(m) credit enhancement that enabled the 40-year mortgage on the project.

Heritage Glen (East Wenatchee, Washington)

In Washington State, the Office of Rural and Farmworker Housing has found a way to sustainably provide housing for seasonal workers. Heritage Glen consists of 35 housing units for farm workers and their families, with a maximum occupancy of 210 persons. Eighteen of the housing units are set aside seasonally for workers whose primary residence is elsewhere. These units are designed to accommodate either groups of unaccompanied workers or small families. The other 17 units are operated year-round for local agricultural employees.

The development includes a laundry facility, play areas and a maintenance shop. Heritage Glen is located in a residential area of East Wenatchee. By combining both seasonal-occupancy and year-round units, the cashflow is more balanced and the site is not vacant during the winter off-season. Year-round residents continue to be excellent 'eyes and ears' on-site.



Heritage Glen is owned and operated by the Housing Authority of Chelan County/City of Wenatchee, which also operates 124 additional farm worker housing units on nine other sites. Heritage Glen opened in 2002, and was developed with capital financing from the USDA Rural Housing Service and the Washington State Housing Trust Fund. USDA also provides full rental assistance, allowing residents to pay 30 percent of the average monthly income for rent and utilities.

¹<http://www.bea.gov/bea/regional/gsp>

²No Refuge From the Fields: Findings From A Survey of Farmworker Housing Conditions in the United States©, Housing Assistance Council, 2001: p.9
<http://www.ruralhome.org/pubs/farmworker/norefuge/execsumm.htm>

³Joe Serna Grant, <http://www.hcd.ca.gov/ca/fwhg/>

⁴<http://www.hud.gov/local/shared/working/localpo/xmfhsgmobilehomefacts.pdf>

⁵Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC) assists rural communities in 13 Western states achieve their goals and visions by providing training, technical assistance and access to resources. RCAC has worked in affordable housing and environmental infrastructure for more than 25 years, and in 1999 established the Agricultural Worker Health and Housing Program (AWHHP) with a \$31 million award from The California Endowment. Through the AWHHP, RCAC has allocated loans and grants to partnerships between health and housing organizations that effectively link health programs with affordable housing for agricultural workers in California, their families and their communities.